

Jonas N.T. Becker

A Hole is not a Void
May 31–August 21, 2024

Wexner Center for the Arts
Columbus, Ohio



70 lbs, 2024 Coal and steel and aluminum armature

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Jonas N.T. Becker's *A Hole is not a Void*, the artist's largest museum exhibition to date, focuses on themes of land, labor, and extraction. Culminating their Wexner Center Artist Residency Award, the exhibition includes newly commissioned photography, video, sculpture, and installation and represents Becker's ongoing work connecting issues in Appalachia to broader questions of environmental injustice and inequity. Born in West Virginia, Becker explores how systems of power in the region and globally place value on the body and the landscape.

Viewers first encounter a series titled *Blank Topographies* (2017–present), which confronts established systems of value for land in the United States. Refacing topographical relief maps of the United States' most expensive mountaintop acreage, Becker paints the surfaces white and strips them of common markers of value, such as city names, natural resources, and cultural landmarks. The erasure highlights the historic relationship between property and inequity in the United States and opens space for alternative systems of value.

The focal point of an adjacent installation is the series *Better or Equal Use* (2020–present), which depicts former mining sites that were redeveloped for public use under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977. Utilizing a self-devised photographic printing process, Becker incorporates coal dust sourced from these locations to produce images that represent what these former mines have become, including prisons and big-box stores. The project highlights connections among different forms of extraction—material, economic, and cultural—where private interests exploit land and people across generations in the region. The installation also features sculptures made of coal and a large-scale floor work that recreates the original topography of a mountain that no longer exists, having been flattened by mining activity.

A separate gallery presents the photographic series *Thank G-d for Mississippi* (2009–2010). Suspending a camera over edges and cliffs that are common sites of fatality in West Virginia, the photographs consider the personal impacts of larger socioeconomic issues. Departing from the long history of documentary portraits of poverty in Appalachia, the photographs put the viewer in the subject's position, offering a view you could only achieve after deciding to jump.

A short film made with support from the Wexner Center's Film/Video Studio will also premiere in the exhibition. The project explores the transmission of politics across generations, focusing on Becker and their mother playing the 1978 board game *Class Struggle*, a socialist version of Monopoly. Through their conversation, Becker's mother considers the impact of her involvement in the political movements of the 60s and 70s, ultimately resolving that the teaching she instilled in the next generation is her greatest legacy.

A Hole is not a Void draws connections between different forms of extraction by layering geographic, cultural, and personal histories. Viewers are asked to consider the literal removal of mountains in Appalachia, global economic dependence on land-based resources, and the inextricable relationship between the personal and the political.

Jonas N.T. Becker's *A Hole is not a Void* is organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts and curated by former Head of Exhibitions Kelly Kivland and former Curator Lucy I. Zimmerman, with support from Curatorial Assistant Jonathan Gonzalez and Curatorial Intern Madelyn Thompson.

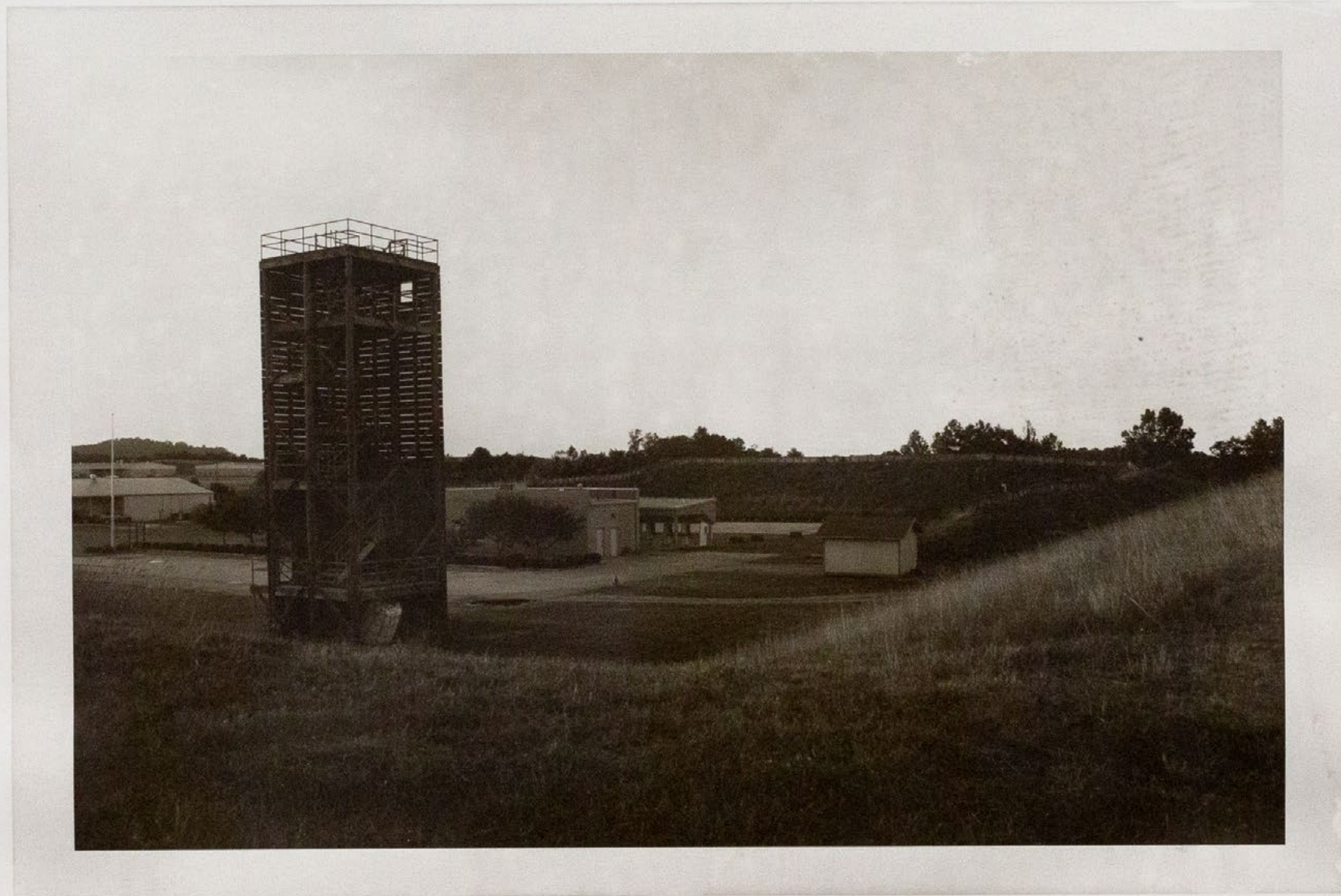


A Hole is not a Void Installation view



Better or Equal Use Installation view

The series *Better or Equal Use* (2020–present) depicts former mountaintop removal mining sites that were redeveloped under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977. This US congressional act mandates that after mining is complete, companies reinstate the façade of the mountain or redevelop the site for “equal or better public or economic use.” Using a self-devised photographic printing process, Becker incorporates coal dust sourced from these locations to produce images that represent what these former mines have become, including prisons, golf courses, and big-box stores.



Better or Equal Use: United States Penitentiary Big Sandy on the former Betty's Knob, 2020/2024 20 × 24 inches Coal, gelatin, dichromate, and paper



Better or Equal Use: "Bridge to Nowhere" on the former East River Mountain, 2020/2024 20 × 24 inches Coal, gelatin, dichromate, and paper





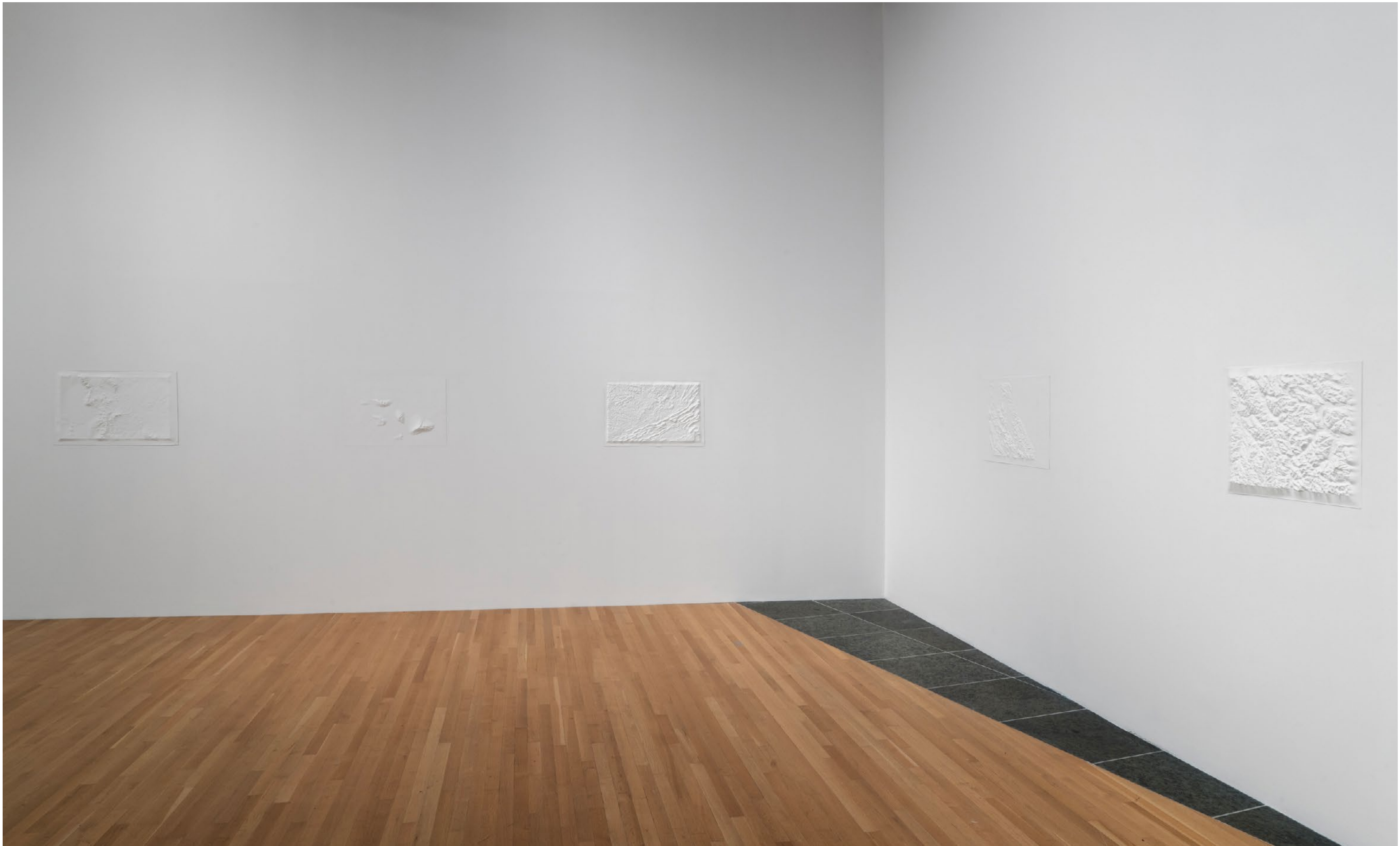


69.2 lbs, 2024 Coal and steel cable

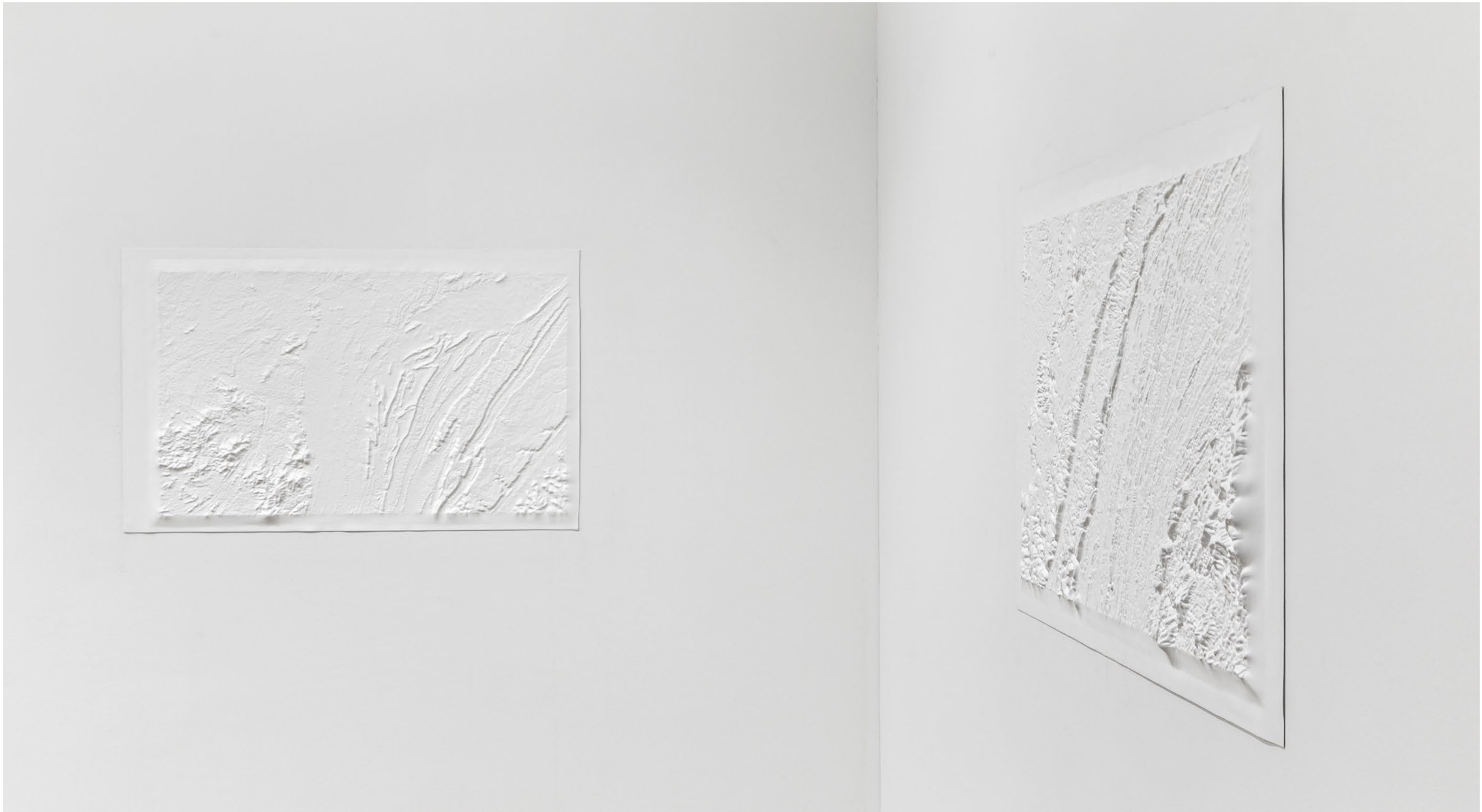


Betty's Knob, 2024 1957 geological survey and black tread tape

Becker has reproduced the original topography of the summit Betty's Knob in Martin County, Kentucky. The site was later destroyed by mountaintop removal mining and then redeveloped under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 as United States Penitentiary Big Sandy. Working with Ohio State's Orton Memorial Library of Geology, Becker digitally replicated a 1957 map of the mountain's natural features. This is likely the last map created before mining began and permanently altered the façade. As visitors walk on the floor work, the downward view invites consideration of a history that is no longer visible due to mining and its aftereffects.



Blank Topographies, 2017–ongoing Installation view



Blank Topographies, 2017–ongoing Installation view

Blank Topographies (2017–present) confronts established systems of value for land in the United States. Refacing topographical relief maps of the country's most expensive mountaintop acreage, Becker paints the surfaces white and strips them of common markers of value, such as city names, natural resources, and cultural landmarks. The works, painted the same white color as the wall, camouflage the symbolic language of land-based capital that would otherwise establish monetary worth. Each work's title includes an undefined number that reflects the value of the location in different ways, from the kinds of resources or species present to the size of an animal herd or the purchase price.



Blank Topographies: 175 million, 2017 Raised-relief topography map and white paint 20 × 32 inches



Blank Topographies: 120 million, 2017 Raised-relief topography map and white paint 20 × 32 inches



Thank G-d for Mississippi Installation view

For this photographic series, Becker returned to their home state of West Virginia to photograph common sites of fatality there. Departing from the long history of documentary portraits of poverty in Appalachia, the photographs put the viewer in the subject's position. Using a boom to suspend a camera 10 feet over these edges and cliffs, they photographed the view only seen by individuals once they have jumped, arresting time between life and death. The series considers the nuanced personal impacts of larger socioeconomic issues within the region.



Thank G-d for Mississippi: Summersville Lake possibly on Whippoorwill Cliffs, WV, 2009 Fujiflex C-print 55 × 44 Inches



Thank G-d for Mississippi: Green Hole, WV, 2009 Fujiflex C-print 55 × 44 Inches



Thank G-d for Mississippi: Bull Run, WV also called Blue Hole, 2009 Fujiflex C-print 55 × 44 Inches



This ongoing film project explores the transmission of politics across generations. In one scene, Becker and their mother play the 1978 board game *Class Struggle*, a socialist version of Monopoly. In another scene, an interview with Becker's mother discussing the impact of her involvement in the political movements of the 1960s and 70s is intercut with footage of the family, including her grandchild. She ultimately resolves that the ideas and values she instilled in the next generation are one of her greatest legacies.







A Hole is not a Void Installation view



The canary has been gone for a while, 2024 C-print



1968/2010, 2024 Hand-carved coal sculpture and resin-molded coal sculpture

The title of this work, *1968/2010*, references two generations of significant mining disasters in West Virginia.



ART

Maja Ruznic with Ann C. Collins

David Ostrowski with Andrew Woolbright

Isaac Julien with Zoë Hopkins

Alvaro Barrington with Alex Bacon

The Queer Imagination, Then and Now
By Christopher T. Richards

ARTSEEN

Willem de Kooning and Italy
By Phong Bui

Fernando Palma Rodríguez: *Āmantēcayōtl: And When it Disappears, it is Said, the Moon has Died (Auh inihcuac huel ompolih, mitoa, ommic in meztli)*
By Eleonor Botoman

Julian Schnabel: *Paintings from 1978–1987*
By David Carrier

Hugh Hayden: *Hughmans*
By William Corwin

Deborah Buck: *Witches Bridge*
By Amanda Millet-Sorsa

Emilie Stark-Menneg: *Thread of Her Scent*
By Chris Crosman

Rita Ackermann: *Splits*
By Ekin Erkan

Haas Brothers: *Moonlight*
By Melissa Ford



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Jonas N.T. Becker: *A Hole is not a Void*

By Robert Alan Grand



Jonas N.T. Becker, *Better or Equal Use: Federal Correctional Institution, McDowell on the former Indian Ridge Mountain*, 2020. Coal, gelatin, dichromate, and paper, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and Wexner Center For The Arts at Ohio State University.

“Appalachia is, often simultaneously, a political construction, a vast geographic region, and a spot that occupies an unparalleled place in our cultural imagination,” wrote writer and historian Elizabeth Catte in her galvanizing 2018 book *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*, noting that, in all of these instances, defining it “is often a top-down process, in which individuals with power or capital tell us who or what we are.” That top-down process often comes at the hands of extraction of the land’s natural resources; of people, labor, and families; and of culture, particularly through sensationalist documentary photography and slanted media narratives. West Virginia-born Jonas N.T. Becker knows these complexities all too well, and *A Hole is not a Void*, their largest museum exhibition to date, brings together a decade and a half of conceptual photography, video, and subtly altered found objects to delve into these entanglements from a systemic level.

Because of the Wexner Center’s deconstructed architecture, the show begins below ground. Becker skillfully integrates this peculiarity of the museum building into their conceptual presentation of works related to harmful coal mining practices, creating an atmosphere in the lower-level gallery where the black walls, dim lighting, and the viewer’s sense of tunneling down make it feel less a creative solution and more like destiny. Downstairs, the series “Better or Equal Use” (2020-present) is the most tantalizing and theoretically rich in the show, a typology of sorts in the vein of Bernd and Hilla Becher but with a much more cynical bent.

Becker documents former sites of the mountaintop removal (MTR) coal mining process, an extractive practice that’s as horrendous and literal as it sounds. With “MTR,” picturesque peaks are blown apart to reach the thin

ON VIEW

Wexner Center For The Arts At Ohio State University
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sounds. With “MTR,” picturesque peaks are blown apart to reach the thin seams of coal buried miles below; the blasted detritus fills nearby valleys, leveling out the landscape from both angles. Thanks to an ambiguously worded clause in “The Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977,” the radical operation is allowed as long as the mining site is redeveloped for “an equal or better economic or public use of the affected land.” As Becker documents, the judgment is suspicious and highly partisan, with sites becoming home to federal prisons, big-box stores, golf courses, and other sites of cultural extraction and labor exploitation.



Installation view: *Jonas N.T. Becker: A Hole is not a Void*, Wexner Center For The Arts at The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Wexner Center For The Arts at Ohio State University.

For the works in “Better or Equal Use,” beauty is a strategy. With its wide-open road flanked by mountain ranges on each side, the photograph *Better or Equal Use: Federal Correctional Institution, McDowell on the former Indian Ridge Mountain* (2020/24) feels like a cinematic establishing shot from a road trip film but one that leads to a twisted destination: a medium-security prison that benefits from the locale’s seclusion. The photograph’s unique printing process, self-devised by the artist, adds another layer of potent materiality and deceptive allure. Loosely inspired by nineteenth-century carbon printing, Becker incorporates coal from the depicted sites into the print’s chemical emulsion, making for one-of-a-kind positives awash in sepia-like hues, with a tonal range unmatched by contemporary processes. (It’s easy to see why carbon printing was also Alfred Stieglitz’s favorite.)

The coal-centric printing process aesthetically elevates these sites of destruction, helping you get lost in their depictions. The hypnotic *Better or Equal Use: Christine West “Bridge to Nowhere” on the former East River Mountain* (2020/2024), for instance, leads the eye up a mountain and through a Robert Smithson-like spiral jetty, which, in actuality, is a dead-end highway. The romanticism of Becker’s images fades into a sinking dread as you contemplate all the methods of extraction involved in making such a photograph. Admiration swiftly becomes implication.

By putting the viewer in a subjective position, Becker challenges photography’s exploitative essence. *Betty’s Knob* (2024), a sculptural component of the series, adds to this tension. Tracing a 1957 geological survey with black tread tape, whose texture slightly sparkles in the gallery’s spotlights, Becker reminds you of the physical contours of the topography that is now destroyed, entangling you in the process.

A Hole is not a Void ends upstairs with two video scenes from the in-progress film *Class Struggle* (2024). Exploring “the transmission of politics across

generations,” it probes why we follow in our parent’s political footsteps or rebel to embrace the other side. In one scene, Becker and their mother, Judith Transue, play the 1970s board game *Class Struggle*, a tongue-in-cheek, Marxist version of *Monopoly*, debating the relevancy of the game’s message half a century later. The video is filled with soulful and spirited conversation about pressing political issues, like climate change, the lack of public funding for education, and issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, sprinkled with comedy throughout. During one exchange, the two joke about the top hat game piece that symbolizes "The Capitalist," and Becker asks their mother what item of clothing might represent today’s predatory industrialists. "I don’t know,” Transue dryly answers, “Hawaiian shirts?"



Installation view: Jonas N.T. Becker: *A Hole is not a Void*, Wexner Center For The Arts at The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Wexner Center For The Arts at Ohio State University.

The in-progress film brings the driving influence of Becker's continued critical project into sharp relief, especially after viewing the first segment where Transue recounts her days as a social worker, activist, and mayor. Almost since birth, Becker has been raised to question the larger forces that put an overwhelming majority of us into a state of precarity regarding environmental, economic, and even human rights issues. (“You celebrated your first birthday, I’m happy to say, in a stroller in Washington DC at the 20th Commemorative March [on Washington] for Jobs [and Freedom],” Transue remembers.) Becker’s practice, then, transcends day-to-day concerns in order to make these faceless and overarching systemic issues visible.

Using imagery to inspire action while avoiding exploitation can feel like a Sisyphean task. In trying to bring awareness to pressing political issues, documentary photography often robs its subjects of their agency and permissive likeness. Yet, Becker doesn’t give up, continuing to find ways to entice viewers, putting them in new positions and pushing them to look at Appalachia’s troubles through a different lens. Leaving the Wexner feeling equally inspired but weighed down by the future, their mother’s words rang in my head: “This is a very long struggle. We are not required to complete the task, but neither are we free to leave it.”

Contributor

Robert Alan Grand
Robert Alan Grand is a writer and photographer based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He is currently the Carolinas Editor-at-Large for *Burnaway* magazine.

Jonas N.T. Becker

Jonas N.T. Becker has exhibited internationally, including at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Photofocus Biennial at the Contemporary Art Center Cincinnati; the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago; Craft Contemporary in Los Angeles; and the Lancaster Museum of Art and History in Lancaster, California. Awards include the Magnum Foundation Counter Histories Fellowship (2022–2023); Lucas Artist Residency Fellowship at Montalvo Art Center, Saratoga, California, (2016–19); Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, (2015); and Six Points Fellowship (2011–2013). Becker is an Associate Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a 2023–24 Global Arts and Humanities Discovery Theme External Fellow at Ohio State University. They live and work between West Virginia and Chicago.



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